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U.S. leaves in Iraq equipment that it may need in Afghanistan



An Army soldier in Baghdad packs up equipment bound for Afghanistan. New rules make it much easier to leave items behind. (Maya Alleruzzo/associated Press)

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BAGHDAD -- Even as the U.S. military scrambles to support a troop surge in [Afghanistan](#), it is donating passenger vehicles, generators and other equipment worth tens of millions of dollars to the Iraqi government.

Under new authority granted by the Pentagon, U.S. commanders in [Iraq](#) may now donate to the Iraqis up to \$30 million worth of equipment from each facility they leave, up from the \$2 million cap established when the guidelines were first set in 2005. The new cap applies at scores of posts that the U.S. military is expected to leave in coming months as it scales back its presence from about 280 facilities to six large bases and a few small ones by the end of next summer.

Some of the items that commanders may now leave behind, including passenger vehicles and generators, are among what commanders in Afghanistan need most urgently, according to Pentagon memos.

Officials involved say the approach has triggered arguments in the Pentagon over whether the effort to leave Iraqis adequately equipped is hurting the buildup in Afghanistan. Officials in the U.S. Central Command, which oversees both wars, have balked at some proposed handovers, and previously rejected an approach that would have granted base commanders even greater leeway.

U.S. commanders in Iraq say they have been judicious in assessing what equipment to earmark for donation. Alan F. Estevez, a deputy undersecretary of defense, wrote in an e-mail that "an important and vital goal is to leave behind fully functioning bases to the Government of Iraq to enable Iraq's civil capacities."

But a U.S. military official critical of the process said the new regulations allow too much latitude to commanders, provide little oversight and fail to account for the urgent need of American forces in Afghanistan, which need the same kinds of items that the troops in Iraq are leaving behind.

"How can a generator or an SUV or a relocatable building be excess if you are buying the very same thing and sending it to Afghanistan?" said the official, who is involved in the process and spoke on the condition of anonymity.

"In Iraq, people drive around in new Yukons, Suburbans, Envoys and new pickups," the official said. "In Kandahar, you find troops from the same U.S. Army driving around in broken-down, 15-year-old, right-hand-drive clunkers with bald tires."

Brig. Gen. Peter C. Bayer Jr., the chief of staff for the ground forces command in Iraq, said that though the Army wanted to make equipment available to units in

Afghanistan, it was often more cost-effective to donate vehicles and other goods to the cash-strapped Iraqi government than to pack and ship it.

"In many cases, we'll spend more between labor and transportation than the equipment is worth," Brig. Gen. Bayer said. "We're not talking about green Army trucks or weapons systems or night-vision capabilities." Under the surge that President Obama outlined last week, commanders in Afghanistan -- a theater long eclipsed by Iraq -- soon will need to accommodate 30,000 additional troops. The Pentagon had already begun moving gear and personnel from Iraq to Afghanistan, reflecting a shift that has made Afghanistan the new administration's top foreign policy priority.

Senior military officials have said that getting new equipment into Afghanistan presents a major logistical challenge. "To the extent we can leverage equipment that's being retrograded out of Iraq, we're going to do that to make that a little easier," Brig. Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., the director of the Pentagon's [Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell](#), said last week in an online discussion with bloggers. "But a significant amount of this equipment will need to be brought in from elsewhere."

Under federal law, government agencies must demonstrate that equipment they wish to donate is not needed by other U.S. agencies. If that criterion is met, equipment can be donated in exchange for "substantial benefits" to the United States.

Earlier this year, U.S. commanders in Iraq asked Pentagon officials for carte blanche to donate certain types of equipment at closing bases.

"These items represents [sic] the minimum requirements that must be met to ensure that [the U.S. military] is enabling the Government of Iraq with a fully functional base as we close or return installations," Brig. Gen. Kurt J. Stein wrote in a July 16 memo to the Pentagon.

That request was blocked at the time by Central Command officials who noted that U.S. forces in Afghanistan needed some of the items that commanders in Iraq wanted to leave behind. Soon after that, the Pentagon announced the new regulations that capped donations at \$30 million per base, a 15-fold increase.

Before June 2008, the Pentagon authorized donations if a formal cost-benefit analysis showed that the expense of transporting the equipment for sale or use by another agency exceeded its value.

Since then, military officials have made decisions on gifts based chiefly on the "substantial benefits" provision.

The latest set of guidelines, issued Oct. 9, gave commanders in Iraq the authority to determine the merit of donating items worth less than \$1 million without prior Pentagon approval. A separate provision raised the cap for donations to a total of \$30 million per facility. The Pentagon also loosened the regulations for the donation of passenger vehicles, which previously could be given away only as an exception.

The memo gave commanders in Iraq a list of "suggested rationales" to justify donations. Those included avoiding potential delays of the withdrawal of troops by relieving them of the logistical challenges of moving tons of equipment and the belief that the gifts would "foster favorable relations" between the two countries.

Some U.S. military officials worry that much of the equipment left behind could be looted.

A U.S. officer whose unit turned over a Joint Security Station in Baghdad to the Iraqi army this summer said Iraqi soldiers looted the facility within hours of their official departure.

"When we returned to the outpost the next morning, most of the beds had already been taken, wood walls and framing had been pulled and several air-conditioning units had been removed from the walls, leaving gaping holes," said the officer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because the event reflects negatively on the Iraqis.

Weeks later, the Caterpillar generator the Americans left behind was barely working, the officer said.

Brig. Gen. Bayer said he was not aware of looting at facilities turned over to the Iraqis.

"Once it's transferred," he said, "it's the government of Iraq's responsibility."